

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
College of Journalism and Mass Communications

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Prof. Dr. Thomas Horky

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Esports, Formula Extreme E, Kings League and other hybrid forms of sport - Reflections on a theory of the virtualization of media sports

Sport has been one of the most important and often discussed topics in modern mass media for decades (Butterworth, 2021). Depending on the region, country or culture, different sports have different meanings: A distinction is made by popularity in the media and cultural relevance, for example national sports, minor sports or media sports, i.e. sports that have a particularly high media importance in this cultural area as well as huge reach and attention. In this understanding, in his model of media sports Horky (2009) distinguishes *genuine media sports*, *mediatized media sports* and *sporting media games*. The digitization of sport in the mass media (Hebbel-Seeger & Horky, 2019; Wiske & Horky, 2020) and the impact of technology (Kim et al., 2025; Schmidt, 2024) seems to have changed or further developed this subdivision in recent years. Above all, the growing importance of esports demonstrates a possible virtualization of media sports (Jenny, 2025).

This presentation attempts to introduce a theory on the virtualization of media sports. Digitization and technology have changed the media perception of reality. Milgram and Kishino (1994) and re-edited Milgram et al. (1994) demonstrate in their "Reality Virtuality Continuum" a scale of the growing influence of changes in the form of "augmented reality" and "augmented virtuality" for the perception between reality ("real environment") and virtuality ("virtual environment"). The scale of the intensity of the change is stepless. Skarbez et al. (2021) expand the continuum with a look at the sensory senses and a perception of virtuality without head-mounted displays, but at the same time support the still valid, fundamental assessment of Milgram et al. (1994).

When looking at world sport, Werron (2010) considers the audience to be a defining factor in the perception of (media) top-class sport. For medial perception of reality, Steuer (1992) also proves the importance of the receivers in the perception of virtual reality, which make identification as reality or virtuality possible in the first place. He refers to the indicator of “interactivity” and with that “immersion” for the intensity of the virtualization of reality. The audience thus has the function of a (media) observer as well as a (digital) participant. This can be summarized with the term “XReality” (Hebbel-Seeger & Horky, 2021) as multiple, different manifestations of the perception of realities. This importance of audience perception is also evident in the ecosystem of digital Esports (Scholz, 2019) and in the audience’s perception of new media technologies (Hutchins et al., 2012; Kunz & Santomier, 2019).

Licen et al. (2022) demonstrate the (historical) change of “MediaSport” (Wenner, 1998) to a form of sports communication, mediatized on diverse levels. An increasing influence through the digitization of media technology is also becoming clear (Werron, 2010; Wiske & Horky, 2020). Andrews (2021) recently proposed the term “Uber-Sport”, Miah (2016) speaks about the “CyberSport Nexus” in this context to refer to the digital transformation of media sports that goes beyond real sports.

This presentation advocates against the background of the central importance of the audience and the growing influence of digital media technology and thus of mediatization, the media top-class sport on the basis of the continuum of Milgram et al. (1994) assign different forms of virtualization. This concept for a theory of the virtualization of media sports could thus extend the model of media sports (Horky, 2009) to include the category of *virtual media sports*.

The characteristics of the virtuality of media sports can theoretically have different forms and thus lead to hybrid forms of mediatization in sports. Influencing factors can be identified, for example, at the following levels:

- Internationalization of teams with a national character (cross-national leagues, the Super League)
- Globalization of audience and new forms of marketing (global and digital sponsorships)
- English language as a driver of international marketing and transnational media reporting
- Digitization of the communicative distribution form (interaction, live streaming, social screening) and thus change in perception (immersion)
- Digitization of analogue forms of movement as a central element of sports
- General competition orientation of social games
- Expansion of the traditional (Olympic) sports model with new competition regulations (closed leagues, franchises instead of clubs) and new forms of competition (change in the canon of Olympic sports)

In summary, it can be said that virtual media sports seem to have neither cultural anchoring nor traditions in a society as well as low but increasing sporting successes of nationally present athletes. There can be seen structural deficits in presentability in

traditional mass media (and in a live sport surrounding), and with that new ways of communication and interaction between sport and fans.

This theoretical approach proposed here is to be checked through various case studies. The lecture will provide as examples short empirical analyzes of Formula Extreme E (a top-class sport without real spectators), drone racing (digitalization of sporting action in media space), the Kings League (digitalized form of football with hybrid elements and gamification) and esports (digitalized sports in virtual space, at events in front of a real audience). With the identification of different forms of mediatization, different forms of virtual media sports can be identified with the basis of the reality virtuality continuum.

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